

REVIEWS

The Plato Cult, David Stove, Blackwell, 1991, xiii + 209.
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Stove has written a series of essays in which various philosophies are considered from a position which may be called positivistic, his preference being for a philosophy informed by the spirit of science and inspired by the ideals of the enlightenment. About other philosophies his opinion is low. Indeed that is considerably to understate the matter. The history of philosophy seems to him little better than a parade of folly and absurdity. Nor is he loath to give his views full expression. His style tends to be vituperative, even in its quieter moments, and he sustains throughout a level of invective that other writers attain only intermittently.

Amongst his targets are Popper, Goodman, Nozick and the Idealist philosophers. Also, he has few pages that do not contain some disparaging reference either to Christianity or to Marxism. He is concerned not simply to expose absurdity but also to explain it by reference to social conditions. For example, the views of Popper are explained as a response to the disintegration of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and as a reaction to the Victorian Age and those of Nozick are seen as a symptom of the degeneration that has afflicted America since its withdrawal from Vietnam. His justification for this procedure is that the views of these writers are so palpably absurd that they require explanation on other than simply intellectual ground.

Stove is a witty man and he can construct a sentence, so that his book rarely fails to hold the attention. But what are we to make of his views?

It will be useful to begin by considering whether his account of Popper is altogether adequate. For the Victorians, science was verifiable, inductive, cautious but aiming at certainty and in the end finding it irrefutably. For Popper, science is falsifiable, deductive

and essentially conjectural. As for irrefutability, that is not a scientific virtue but a vice. All this, according to Stove, is to be explained as an instance of that frivolous reversal of Victorian values so characteristic of the 1920's. Moreover, Popper's philosophy, though frivolous in its motivation, has been serious in its effect. For it was he who let loose not simply Lakatos and Kuhn but also Feyerabend.

Of Feyerabend one may say that Stove could not have been harder on him had he been a Christian. In a book in which many are abused none is more abused than he. For it is he who, for Stove, represents the disintegration of the positivist tradition, a disintegration induced from within and occasioned by frivolity.

One may wonder, however, whether this story is entirely accurate. The disintegration of positivism would seem, on reflection, to have been occasioned by something more serious than Popper. One may wonder indeed whether Popper's philosophy was not a response to a disintegration already sensed, the seeds of which were contained from the beginning in positivism itself.

Positivism achieved its full flowering amongst the educated classes during the late Victorian Age. It was suggested, of course, by the achievements of science and especially by those of the Newtonian system. Nevertheless, it was not a scientific doctrine but involved elements of the moral as well as the intellectual and formed a *Weltanschauung* or view of the world. Essential to the doctrine, for example, was the idea that the true view of the world was only what would suggest itself to any person of common sense, so long as he was prepared to trust in the evidence of his senses; for in the ages before science people had gone astray not so much through error as through fantasy, not because the truth was hidden but because they preferred not to see it. Hitherto, in religion and in philosophy, reality had been treated as hidden and the empirical world as mere appearance. But that was pseudo-profundity, the product of wishful thinking. True profundity lay in acknowledging the apparent as the real, in accepting the empirical world as the only real one. Here then is a *Weltanschauung* which, like any other, combines various elements; a view of the world, according to which the empirical is the only real one, a set of values whereby truth is contrasted with fantasy, and an epistemology which is empiricist, truth being revealed by the evidence of the senses.

It is a powerful vision of the world and innumerable people, having encountered it when young, have been held by it for the rest of their lives. Nevertheless, it has not fared well. For this there have been various causes amongst which two may be distinguished. The first is that once the investigation of electro-magnetic phenomena had shown the Newtonian system to be inadequate, it became increasingly difficult to identify science with common sense. Stove must be one of the few people still alive who believe that by referring to the common sense world of science they can automatically ridicule religion. The world of science now consists of entities which may be treated either as a wave or a particle and which, when they have a position, have no velocity and, when they have a velocity, no position. Nowadays it is not in religion or in philosophy but rather in science that the empirical world seems more apparent than real. Indeed, in reading the physics of the present day, one feels one has returned to childhood and is walking again in fairyland.

The discrepancy between science and common sense is now so great that almost anyone can see it. But in fact it had long been apparent to those who were prepared to look. Stove ridicules the views of a philosopher such as Parmenides who said that there is no motion. But modern science began with the Copernican theory which says in effect that nothing is stationary. The theory, it is true, allows that objects can be stationary relative to the earth. One may be quite certain, however, that Parmenides, equally, would have allowed a relative sense in which objects are in motion. The scientific view may be true and the philosophical view false but the one is no closer than the other to common sense.

Moreover we here touch on the second weakness inherent in positivism, namely, its empiricism. On the positivist view, modern science has been successful because unlike earlier forms of science, it has derived its theories not from a priori considerations but simply from direct experience of the world. Now consider the implausibility of that view in explaining the difference between the Copernican theory and the Ptolemaic theory, which preceded it. It is evidently the latter theory, not the former, which conforms the more closely to what is suggested by sense-experience. The Ptolemaic theory was accepted for so many hundreds of years not because people had a preference for fantasy, but because there was nothing in their experience which would suggest it was false. For

more than a century the Copernican theory was not generally accepted simply because people thought that it conflicted with the evidence of their senses. The theory, indeed, was criticised by arguments identical with those which, in later centuries, were adopted by the positivists. Galileo, for example, was told that perception is the only criterion of reality and that the Copernican theory therefore could not be true since it was in conflict with perception. Biologists inform us that the senses have evolved as a means for preserving our existence on the surface of this planet. As such, they have proved serviceable. But the moment we lift our eyes above the surface of the planet our senses, in consequence, are liable to lead us astray. That is a point which has been confirmed, at every stage, by the development of modern science. From the Copernican theory, through the atomic theory, to the developments of quantum mechanics, science has demonstrated the inadequacy of the senses in revealing the fundamental nature of the world. Here we find the most poisonous of the vipers nestling in the bosom of positivism. Positivism could not have existed without the success of science, but the empiricism which is essential to it has proved incapable of explaining that success. Stove has an amusing page in which he figures in a recumbent position, gazing at the sky on a clear night. He contrasts the world as it appears from that position with the world as it appears in the fantastic constructions of religion. From that perspective, religion appears so evidently underdetermined by what meets the senses. He fails to note that the constructions of theoretical science, from that perspective, would have appeared equally underdetermined and no less fantastic.

Now here we have an explanation, somewhat more plausible than Stove's own, for the philosophy of Popper. It is an attempt to wrestle with the viper. Popper has detected the difficulty in supposing that science, as a vast edifice of secure truth, can rest on so slender a base as that of the senses. He might have forsaken positivism and denied that the senses form the sole base of science. Instead he remains true to positivism and denies that science constitutes a secure edifice of truth. Science, so far from being secure in the truth, will never attain it. It is a set of conjectures forever in pursuit of the truth. At first, this would seem indistinguishable from complete scepticism. But science, though it will never attain the truth, may nevertheless approach it. That is because sense-experience, though incapable of establishing a theory

as true, is capable of showing it false. Consequently we may hope to approach the truth by using sense-experience to falsify our conjectures. There is about this, one concedes, an air of desperation. But it is not frivolous, for it is an attempt to meet a real difficulty.

Moreover, it is a difficulty that Stove himself seems unable or unwilling to recognise. Thus one finds him using against his opponents arguments which depend on empiricist assumptions, apparently unaware that these arguments would readily serve to undermine the whole of science. His treatment of Kant will illustrate the point. According to Kant, the world in its most fundamental aspects is inaccessible to the human mind. Stove takes this view to be incoherent. It is an example of what he terms the veil-doctrine. Kant is like a man claiming that there is something on the other side of a veil that no human mind can penetrate. But if he cannot penetrate the veil, asks Stove, how can he know there is anything on the other side? The obvious reply is that he may infer this from what lies on his own side of the veil. There may be enough on one's own side to infer that something lies beyond it but not enough to infer what it is. Similarly one may know enough about the world to infer that in its more fundamental aspects it cannot be known. An empiricist, it is true, would have no choice but to treat that inference as incoherent, since he believes that a factual inference holds only amongst elements falling within experience. One cannot infer B from A unless one can directly experience not simply A but also B. Now that is a principle Stove seems to accept. Indeed he seems indignant that it is not accepted by all of his fellow positivists. Devitt and Jackson, apparently, have rejected it. One can only admire their good sense, for the principle, rigorously handled, would lay waste to the whole of science. For example, difficulties which appear at the level of experience have led scientists to frame an atomic theory of matter. But in the nature of the case, the elements to which the theory refers cannot themselves appear at the level of experience.

A further example of the above point may be found in Stove's treatment of the Victorian Idealists. Throughout his treatment he fails to note that Idealism of their type is an inevitable consequence of empiricism. On the empiricist view, one can know only what falls within one's own experience. Locke, whilst holding that view held also as essential to matter that it may exist whether or not it can be experienced – Berkeley noted that these views are

inconsistent. On empiricist grounds, one cannot know that matter may exist independently of being experienced. It is only in experience that it is knowable. That argument may be taken either as a *reductio ad absurdum* of empiricism or as the foundation for Idealism. For if one retains one's empiricism, one is forced to acknowledge either that matter is entirely unknowable or that it exists only where there is a mind to experience it. Now that is precisely the premise of Victorian Idealism. Stove criticises the Idealists at length. But in fact they differ from himself chiefly in following more rigorously the implications of his own empiricist assumptions.

We may note also that Stove's treatment of Idealism, as well as being deficient in the above respect, is confused in its exposition. For example, Hamilton, who was never an Idealist, is treated as a leading exponent of the view. Stove confuses Hamilton with Berkeley, taking him to hold that objects cannot exist without some mind to know them. What Hamilton in fact held was that knowing can occur only under limiting conditions. According to Hamilton, human knowing or observing is a process occurring in nature which, like any other such process, is subject to inherent limitations. The alternative is to suppose that the human mind exists altogether outside the conditions of nature. But then whatever falls outside the conditions for knowledge cannot be known. To rephrase the point: observation, being subject to inherent limitations, must at some point interfere with whatever it is one seeks to observe. Hamilton's views, so far from being Idealist, are the result of taking the naturalistic view and applying it rigorously to human knowledge itself. Views comparable to his are now embodied in modern science, as for example in Heisenberg's so called uncertainty principle.

Stove's book, as I have implied, is very lively. The invective, thought unflagging, is expressed with style and wit. But the real theme of the book is one that is hidden from its author. It is to be found not in the folly and absurdity that he takes to lie around him but in the inadequacy of the position that he himself occupies.

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